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ABSTRACT

This booklet presents ways to ensure student safety in Texas schools. It offers a 10-step plan that, when implemented in a systematic way, can reduce acts of school violence. The steps are divided into three components: prevention, intervention, and enforcement. In prevention it is important to know the goals and objectives; to be proactive; to identify roles and responsibilities; to prepare a comprehensive plan; to establish clear expectations for students, parents, teachers, and administrators; and to address warning signs before they turn into trouble. In the intervention mode it is important to look for trouble before it erupts. The report suggests that various detection methods be used, that outsiders' access to students be restricted, that students be given strategies for dealing with bad situations, that troubled families be identified, that individuals be in the right place to intervene, and that there be a plan of action, continually rehearsed, that is appropriate for various occasions. The third component of the school-safety plan, enforcement, suggests that there be no double standards and that the student code of conduct be used to set standards. Discipline management should extend inside and outside the classroom, and teachers and staff should have appropriate training in discipline-management techniques. (RJM)

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TSPR

TEXAS SCHOOL PERFORMANCE REVIEW

Keeping Texas Children Safe In School

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COMMON SENSE SOLUTIONS TO HELP ADDRESS THE SAFETY ISSUES AND CHALLENGES FACING MOST PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS

JUNE 1998

Carole Keeton Rylander, Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts

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TSPR

TEXAS SCHOOL PERFORMANCE REVIEW

Keeping Texas Children Safe In School

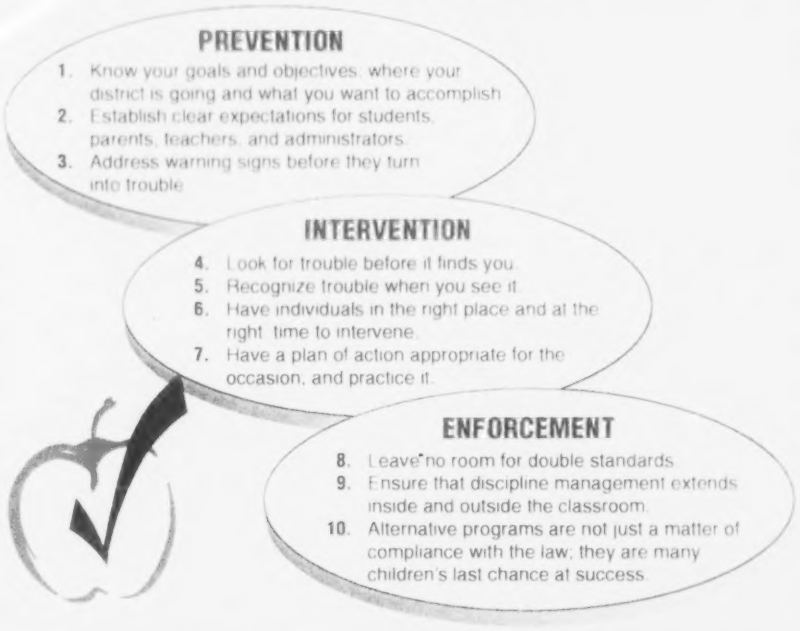
Since 1991, the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, has been conducting performance reviews of the state's public school districts. In the 28 districts reviewed to date, one issue that sparks the most parental concern, public outcry, and administrative frustration is the amount of crime and violence in and around the schools.

Nationally, the growing perception that not all public schools are safe places of learning prompted Congress to pass the Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities Act of 1994, which provides for the support of drug and violence prevention programs.

On a statewide level, lawmakers recognized that Texas is not immune to the types of violent events that have cropped up elsewhere in the United States. The 1995 Texas Legislature addressed school violence by establishing major safety- and security-related revisions to the Texas Education Code (Education Code). According to Chapter 37 of the Education Code, each school must adopt a student code of conduct. Additionally, students who engage in serious misconduct must be removed from the regular education setting and placed in alternative education programs; specific information concerning the arrest or criminal conduct of students must be shared between law enforcement and local school districts.

Reports indicate these changes in law have had an impact. In a 1993 statewide survey conducted by the Texas Federation of Teachers (TFT), 7.5 percent of teachers reported being physically assaulted by either a student or non-student intruder and 36 percent reported being verbally assaulted. Verbal assaults reported in a 1996 survey dropped to 30 percent, and physical assaults dropped to 6.5

Taken individually, the steps outlined in the law or those used by successful districts don't seem dramatic. But when districts apply these measures in a comprehensive system, they can and do get significant results.


PREVENTION
1. Know your goals and objectives, where your district is going and what you want to accomplish.
2. Establish clear expectations for students, parents, teachers, and administrators.
3. Address warning signs before they turn into trouble.
INTERVENTION
4. Look for trouble before it finds you.
5. Recognize trouble when you see it.
6. Have individuals in the right place and at the right time to intervene.
7. Have a plan of action appropriate for the occasion, and practice it.
ENFORCEMENT
8. Leave no room for double standards.
9. Ensure that discipline management extends inside and outside the classroom.
10. Alternative programs are not just a matter of compliance with the law; they are many children's last chance at success.

percent. And although more than 7,800 weapons were confiscated in 1997 from Texas students, that number is down by 8 percent since 1995.

The most disturbing statistic reported in TFT's 1996 survey, however, came in answer to the question concerning enforcement of the law. Only about 34 percent of the teachers responded that their school districts are taking the law seriously, a fact supported by observations made by the Comptroller's Texas School Performance Review (TSPR). TSPR has found school districts and individual campuses within districts are struggling with the enforcement and application of the laws. While most districts have Codes of Conduct, some lack critical elements needed to comply with the law. And, those that contain all necessary provisions of the law are in some cases inconsistently applied.

Differences in the day-to-day management of school safety and security programs can have a profound effect on their success or failure.

Districts that are successful in dealing with crime in and around schools are approaching the problem in a systematic and comprehensive manner. For example, the Longview and San Marcos Consolidated Independent School District (ISDs) found that gathering comprehensive information about various student discipline and safety-related incidents, activities, and programs could help assess the programs, modify procedures, and ensure a higher degree of community involvement.

Houston ISD's police department achieved a 14 percent reduction of crime after adopting safety and security strategies including: gang intervention, education, and investigation; alternative education facilities that serve suspended or expelled students; and the reassignment of officers to areas of higher activity.

Taken individually, the steps outlined in the law or those used by successful districts don't seem dramatic. But when districts apply these measures in a comprehensive system, they can and do get significant results. Outlined within this report are the steps that TSPR has found must be thought through and carefully implemented to keep our children safe in school.

Prevention, Intervention, and Enforcement: Understand the Differences

An effective program of safety and security begins with a clear understanding of three key elements: prevention, intervention, and enforcement.

Prevention—*the foundation laid to deter crime and violence.*

Prevention might best be described as the planning phase of a school safety program. Prevention consists of the groundwork the district lays to prevent crime from occurring in the first place. Just as an accounting office establishes internal controls that prevent an employee from writing himself a check, for instance, so too must the district attempt to eliminate situations that create a reasonable expectation that criminal behavior can go unpunished. An effective prevention program includes a clear vision of district goals and objectives; clear expectations for students, parents, faculty members, and administrators; and policies and procedures that address "warning signs" before they turn into real trouble.

Intervention—*stepping in before it goes too far.*

No matter how good a system you have, someone will find a way around it or test its boundaries. Some will consciously plot and scheme to break the rules, while others will simply forget them in a moment of weakness. Intervention is an action step in the safety process—stepping in when crime or violence occurs and stopping it before it becomes a disaster. An effective intervention program requires you to look for trouble before it finds you; recognize trouble when you see it; have the right people in the right place at the right time; and have a plan of action appropriate for the occasion, and practice it.

Enforcement—*what do you do in the aftermath?*

The deed is done—now what? Enforcement in our public schools includes enforcing the rules, administering punishment where applicable, and helping children who have disobeyed the rules learn how to change their behavior. Effective enforcement leaves no room for double standards. Districts must understand that discipline management extends inside and outside the classroom, and that alternative programs are not there simply to comply with the law—they represent the last chance for many children to achieve success.

PREVENTION

1 Know your goals and objectives: where your district is going and what you want to accomplish.

Some Texas school districts operate their own police departments, while others employ security guards or off-duty police officers. Still others have a combination of security guards and certified police officers. Many quiet districts still don't have, or need, security forces of any sort.

Be proactive, not reactive.

The biggest problem encountered by TSPR in this area has been the hiring of guards or officers in response to escalating crime without a *clear design* in mind for what the district really needs or wants to accomplish.

For example, what are the community's and the district's expectations of personnel assigned to handle security on a campus? Teachers may think they should remove disruptive children from the classroom. An assistant principal in charge of discipline may feel they should not be involved in discipline, but instead should protect the children from outsiders on the premises and assist with hall monitoring. Administrators may prefer that security officers patrol parking lots during the school day and deter vandalism after hours. And students may look to them for protection from other students.

In the Port Arthur ISD, TSPR found that police officers employed by the district had a totally different understanding of their role in the district from that of the parents or the administrators. No one was wrong — but before any program can become successful, everyone needs to be working from the same page.

Clearly identify roles and responsibilities.

Nothing is wrong with any of these ideas; an effective safety and security program must begin by identifying such expectations. Next, however, comes the assignment of roles and responsibilities. What is the teacher's role in security situations? What is expected of the principal and assistant principal? When is a uniformed, certified police officer appropriate? When would a trained security guard be preferable? Should the security force carry weapons? Do they need a patrol vehicle? Who will respond to calls, and how will calls for assistance be communicated? What is the role of local law enforcement agencies on the campus or within the school district?

A good security plan takes a "global" view of school safety.

Prepare a comprehensive plan.

Some districts believe their student code of conduct, which outlines a variety of student offenses and resulting consequences, also provides an adequate guide to the duties and responsibilities of administrators and teachers in the disciplinary process. In fact, few of the codes of conduct examined by TSPR contain the kind of detail needed to establish an effective safety and security function or to clearly assign responsibilities related to the function. Furthermore, job descriptions for security officers, teachers, and administrators often are vague on issues of discipline. For example, a teacher's job description may say: "Maintains discipline in the classroom following state and local guidelines"—which is not really an adequate guide to such a complex and difficult topic.

A good security plan takes a "global" view of school safety. While some elements of school safety rest with the individual campuses, many others are issues for the district as a whole, such as designating hazardous bus routes for students who live in areas in which walking to school would be unsafe and coordinating district security programs with local law enforcement.

2 Establish clear expectations for students, parents, teachers, and administrators.

Psychologists have long said that children want to know their boundaries—that they desperately need fair and consistent guidance. Texas law requires each school district to prepare a student code of conduct to give students clear standards for their behavior.

No matter how well-written, a code of conduct is only useful when it is used—and used consistently.

The Student Code of Conduct must comply with the law, and it must be crystal clear.

Section 37.001 of the Texas Education Code instructs the district's school board, in consultation with the district's site-based decision-making committee, to adopt a student code of conduct. This code must be prominently displayed at each school campus. It must specify the circumstances in which a student may be removed from a classroom, campus, or alternative program; specify conditions authorizing or requiring a principal or other administrator to transfer a student to an alternative education program; and list steps for student suspension.

A student can be removed to an alternative setting under this section of the law if, for example, he or she has committed a felony or is under the influence of, sells, gives, or delivers drugs, alcohol, or inhalants. Other sections discuss actions that may result in suspension and expulsion.

TSPR has found varying levels of compliance with this law. While some student codes of conduct are exemplary, others do not track the law or clearly define offenses and the resulting discipline. If any party involved in the student discipline process, including students, parents, faculty, or administrators, is unclear about what offenses lead to which action, the entire disciplinary process is undermined, and the chances of consistent application of the code are slim.

One way to ensure that the rules are clear is to involve people from outside the district's central office in writing and editing the code of conduct. For example, some districts use a team of students and parents to draft a code that students can understand. Teachers, principals, and security personnel can provide insights about the practical application of the rules. Rules cannot be effective if the people charged with enforcing them don't understand them or simply can't comply with unrealistic expectations.

The Student Code of Conduct must be applied consistently.

The essence of prevention is voluntary compliance. A code of conduct may comply with the letter of the law, but it can accomplish little on its own. No matter how well-written, a code of conduct is only useful when it is used—and used consistently. If the students on one campus are treated differently than those on another, or if the rules are bent for various groups of students while other groups are expected to toe the mark, critical boundaries are blurred and respect for the system is undermined.

Everyone must know the rules.

Rules concerning conduct are—or, at any rate, should be—a contract between students, parents, faculty, and administration. No one should be able to claim that he or she didn't know the rules. Contracts take many forms, but in this case verbal exchanges do not appear to be enough. The most successful programs require a signature from parents and students acknowledging the rules up front.

In one school, TSPR observed laminated posters throughout the district, giving the "dos" and "don'ts" contained in the code of conduct. Few students on that campus could claim they didn't know the expectations—if they committed the offense, they did it willfully, knowing the consequences.

3 Address warning signs before they turn into trouble.

When you see specks of sawdust around your house and little bugs flying about, you know you have termites someplace, and you call the exterminators; you don't wait for the roof to fall in. And while it may be an uncomfortable conversation, you tell your neighbor to have his house checked, too. When a school district sees trouble brewing, its inclination should not be to handle the matter internally and keep it quiet. No teacher or administrator wants the local newspaper to publish a story about drugs or violence on their campuses, no matter how isolated the incident may be. Yet a policy of denial and secretiveness can be and usually *is* counterproductive.

Know what to look for; share information.

Signs of gang activity and drug abuse often are detectable by a trained eye. Instances of random violence and crime can be more difficult to detect, but there are warning signs there as well. Educating faculty and staff to recognize these warning signs is a valuable first step toward prevention and intervention. Section 21.451 of the Education Code requires district staff training in conflict resolution and discipline strategies.

Bringing employees from across the district or from other districts together to discuss mutual concerns is a useful way to stay alert to signs of trouble, and a good springboard to the search for solutions. Similarly, sharing information on gang and drug-related activity with local law enforcement agencies can help lay the foundation for cooperative prevention and intervention programs by:

- identifying areas in which gang activity is concentrated and any illicit drug activities in which gangs are engaged.
- identifying and documenting techniques used by gang members to recruit young children and sell them drugs.
- using this information to develop programs that heighten students' awareness of these techniques and the reasons why gangs want them to become involved with drugs.

Take action.

Some districts are educating their students on alternatives to violence. In Corpus Christi ISD, for example, students in grades 3 through 8 are taught dispute resolution skills. Other districts work with local and state agencies to provide additional counseling services. In Wimberley ISD, a small district near Austin, a study completed five years ago indicated alcohol and drug use by community teenagers. In response, the district provides services such as individual and group counseling and crisis intervention to area junior- and senior-high students. Administrators and parents told TSPR that this process has benefited both students and parents in the district. Drug and gang awareness programs also produce good results; most districts reviewed by TSPR are using money from the Federal Safe and Drug Free School Act for such programs.

TSPR also has found that many secondary campuses are closed, meaning that students normally cannot leave the campuses for lunch or at any other time during the school day. This is a good deterrent to off-campus crime and mischief, and can prevent students from leaving campus to obtain drugs, weapons, or alcohol and bringing them back onto the campus. After school, security alarms and security patrols provide a good deterrent to vandalism.

Districts should never hesitate to call for help from the local community, churches, civic organizations, law enforcement agencies, and parent-teacher organizations. Lay your cards on the table and seek their help in devising plans that work. Beware of the temptation to blame the school district alone for the problem. Everyone in the community — starting with parents — must be involved before a school district will become a safe haven for children. In Corpus Christi, business owners have created a "safe zone" around schools where gang activity is high. Business owners, employees, and community members watch out for students and report problems to police immediately.

Support from the board and staff, students, parents, and community members in the fight against drugs, weapons, and misbehavior is essential. The causes of these problems are com-

Beware of the temptation to blame the school district alone for the problem. Everyone in the community — starting with parents — must be involved before a school district will become a safe haven for children.

munity-wide and can be addressed effectively only through cohesive, coordinated community efforts. Some ideas for such efforts include:

- creating a directory of community organizations and available services and making it available to all teachers and school administrators
- regularly meeting with key contacts in community organizations to discuss pertinent issues
- seeking sponsorship from area businesses for anti-drug and anti-violence programs

Another interesting concept is the use of teen courts, in which students hear the "cases" of fellow students. These proceedings give students on both sides of disputes a better opportunity to understand the ramifications of their actions.

4 INTERVENTION

Look for trouble before it finds you.

Possession of drugs or weapons on a school campus is a serious offense, but not as serious as the *use* of drugs or weapons on campus. Intervention means looking for trouble before it becomes a disaster.

Detection takes many forms.

Some schools across the state and nation have installed metal detectors to prevent students from bringing weapons on campus. But not all detection methods are so drastic. Periodic, unannounced inspections of lockers can discourage students from bringing drugs or weapons to school. More than half of all districts responding to a survey conducted by the Texas Center for Education Research for the Texas Senate Interim Committee on Education use drug-sniffing dogs on campus. Spring ISD bought such a dog and saved more than $15,000 annually over the price of a contract service.

Intervention Ideas

- unannounced locker inspections
- drug-sniffing dogs
- closed secondary campuses
- security alarms
- restricted access to campus
- fenced playgrounds

Restrict outsiders' access to students.

TSPR has found that it is *very* important to restrict access to students by outsiders. Nonstudents of any age should not be allowed to enter school grounds undetected. Drug sales, gang activity, and abductions by noncustodial parents and even by violent offenders can occur when unauthorized individuals are allowed on school property.

Some districts use dress codes to keep gang-related attire out of schools; others issue student badges that must be worn at all times while on campus. Both methods allow campus administrators and security personnel to readily identify outsiders who may be mingling with students.

It is critical to keep all but the main entrance to schools locked after the beginning of the school day. Doors can be equipped to allow students to leave the facility in an emergency without being operable from the outside. A constantly monitored main entrance should be the only way for a parent or any other visitor to enter the school. Visitors should be required to sign in and wear badges. Teachers and staff members should be instructed to stop anyone wandering the halls or grounds without a badge—whether they think they know them or not—and ask them to return to the main office to sign in.

The design of some buildings, and the use of portable buildings on a campus, can make it impossible to monitor school traffic this closely. When possible, such campuses should be fenced. When this is not possible, walkways, exterior entrances to restrooms, and areas where a nonstudent could enter the premises should be monitored either electronically or in person.

In the Corpus Christi ISD, exterior bathrooms on one campus are used predominantly by children on the playground or in portable buildings. An unfenced playground and the presence of known sex offenders in the neighborhood led parents to demand surveillance cameras and structural changes to the facility that would allow for closer monitoring of these restrooms.

Establish an effective truancy program.

Another issue that contributes to crime and violence is truancy. An effective system to identify truant students and notify their parents can go a long way toward keeping children off the streets and away from dangerous and unlawful activities. Some Texas districts have set up programs in which the local constable or sheriff visits the truant child's home and issues citations for truancy. Aggressive programs of this type have boosted attendance rates and lowered community crime statistics.

During a pilot study done in 1996 by the Austin ISD, Travis County Constables made 4,200 home visits to families of truant children. The visits cost $30,000, but generated $114,000 for the schools when attendance increased by about 2 percent. The program got hundreds of truants back into classrooms and off the streets.

5 Recognize trouble when you see it.

Know who is in your neighborhood.

Lists of known sex offenders are available to all school districts and are regularly updated. Give parents access to this information. Tell teachers and staff who is out there and where they are. If you have pictures or descriptions of people in close proximity to the school, circulate the information.

Give students ways to deal with bad situations.

Talk openly and honestly about issues like drugs, violence, and crime in an age-appropriate setting. Provide students with ways to tell campus administrators about potentially dangerous situations while remaining anonymous. A number of districts reviewed by TSPR have a toll-free hotline allowing students to report hidden dangers, threats of violence, or gang activity. Again, teach students how to avoid conflict and resolve conflicts without violence.

Many school districts now use "school resource officers," local police officers who work in schools not to provide security, but to teach students how to deal with conflicts, resolve problems, face peer pressures, and avoid criminal activity.

Identify students and families who need help.

Intervention also involves identifying students who are at risk of getting into trouble and taking action to help them before they do so. For example, Ysleta ISD's Legacy Program is an intervention program for middle school students whose brothers or sisters have been placed in alternative education program because of disciplinary problems.

Other successful intervention programs bring parents and students together. For example, Houston ISD has a program called Crossroads, a nine-week voluntary intervention program for chemically dependent students that provides both students and their families with individual and group counseling.

Many school districts concentrate resources at the high school level only to find that the real trouble is brewing at their middle school.

6 Have individuals in the right place and at the right time to intervene.

Allocate resources properly.

Another critical element in the planning and design of any school safety and security program is a system that allocates security resources—guards, certified police officers, or other disciplinary officers—according to need. TSPR has observed that many school districts concentrate resources at the high school level only to find that the real trouble is brewing at their middle schools, and that virtually no resources are available for elementary schools. TSPR noted that middle schools in one district

were experiencing more disorderly conduct than area high schools, yet no security or law enforcement personnel were assigned to those campuses. Where are incidents occurring? What kind of incidents are most prevalent on a campus and what is the best method of handling them? How many incidents can a security guard or officer respond to? Who will provide backup if one individual is otherwise engaged? At what point do you add another guard to the rotation? How many patrol guards do you need at night? Who will provide security for athletic events, and how many are needed? When is contracting more efficient than hiring in-house staff?

In the Beaumont ISD, infraction data from the discipline management system ranks campuses from least violent to most violent and becomes the basis for assigning security patrol officers and prioritizing district security needs.

The design for your safety and security system should answer these questions and many others by ensuring that staffing adjustments are clearly based on *actual* needs.

The Beaumont ISD had not taken a comprehensive look at the costs and benefits of operating its own police department. At TSPR's recommendation, the district adopted a staffing plan for security officers that included a balanced deployment of peace officers and security guards that is now providing equal or better quality security for the district at a savings of $95,000 per year.

7 Have a plan of action appropriate for the occasion, and practice it.

TSPR has found that districts must have a plan for handling crisis situations. For example, the Texarkana ISD maintains a comprehensive Crisis Procedure Manual on each campus that contains emergency phone numbers and procedures for responding to situations involving chemicals, explosions, tornadoes, bomb threats, nuclear warnings, and weather. This plan should address a multitude of concerns: When a child or teacher become seriously ill or injured, for instance, who calls for assistance? When bad weather occurs, a fire breaks out, or a bombing is threatened, what are the evacuation plans? How are the appropriate authorities notified when an emergency occurs? When a fight starts, who should step in to stop it? When a student reports that another student has drugs or a weapon, who investigates or attempts to confiscate the items? What is legal behavior for a teacher or security guard? What should be left to law enforcement officials? When are parents to be notified, and who notifies them? If a serious incident requires staff support from other campuses, how will this need be communicated? What communication devices are available to staff in the field? Who will provide coverage while staff responds to a call for assistance? When are local authorities called for assistance?

A good emergency plan should be well-rehearsed by staff and students.

Rehearse the plan.

A good emergency plan should be well-rehearsed by staff and students and should address disasters such as tornadoes, fires, and floods as well as more common disruptions.

Fire drills and emergency evacuation procedures often are practiced in schools throughout Texas. But open discussions among teachers and administrators about such procedures are not as common. One school district reviewed by TSPR had a written procedure for dealing with a life-threatening situation, but when it actually occurred, no one was in a position to consult the manual as the emergency unfolded. They handled the situation as they saw fit at the time, only to find that they had not followed proper procedures, leaving the district at risk of lawsuit. Had they had an opportunity to talk through case studies and practice their responses, they would have been more likely to do the right thing in the heat of the moment.

ENFORCEMENT

8 Leave no room for double standards.

When a student commits a crime on school premises, the district faces a dilemma. Should the district turn the student over to the proper authorities for arrest and sentencing, or should they discipline him or her internally? Are certain crimes more deserving of arrest than others? When does misbehavior cross the line into crime?

The Student Code of Conduct must set the standard.

The Texas Education Code outlines specific offenses that must be reported to local law enforcement officials, but TSPR has found that this part of the law is applied inconsistently from district to district. Some districts reviewed by TSPR have zero-tolerance policies that state that *any* crime committed on school premises will be reported to the police. Others have a zero-tolerance rule about drug possession, dealing, or abuse. Still others have no written policy defining what offenses are worthy of arrest, but consult with law enforcement officials on a case-by-case basis. The lack of a written standard, however, leaves the district open to criticism from parents and the public and possible discrimination lawsuits. School districts must make hard decisions about the handling of criminal and non-criminal offenses and *clearly* define offenses and their responses.

Apply the Code of Conduct consistently.

Once the standard is set, *no* exceptions should be made. In one district reviewed by TSPR, the son of a district staff member was caught smoking marijuana and placed in detention, while another student was expelled and subsequently placed in alternative education, as stipulated in the district's Student Code of Conduct. Dual standards such as these are unacceptable.

9 Ensure that discipline management extends inside and outside the classroom.

Teachers and staff must have appropriate training in discipline-management techniques.

Teachers need regular and ongoing discipline-management training; the Education Code requires training in discipline strategies. Teachers are on the front line of public education, and teacher surveys conducted in Texas and across the nation indicate that disciplinary challenges in the classroom are escalating.

Teacher training is especially important as more special-needs children are being placed in regular education classrooms. Regular education teachers often are ill-equipped to manage such children. A high percentage of invalid referrals for special education testing or a disproportionate number of special education students referred to alternative education can signal a need for additional teacher training in discipline management.

Teachers need administrators' support when students persistently misbehave.

Teachers cannot be expected to educate children when persistently disruptive students are allowed to remain in the classroom. Although Chapter 37 of the Education Code is clear in this regard, teachers still find it difficult to remove some students from class. Good students suffer because of the antics of a few disruptive ones. Teachers need to know that there is a way to remove these students from the classroom. The Safe Schools Act requires all schools to make copies of the law available at every campus. Teachers should be trained in specific procedures required to invoke the provisions of the Safe Schools Act. And students

Teachers cannot be expected to educate children when persistently disruptive students are allowed to remain in the classroom.

need to know that they cannot harass or terrorize a teacher and get away with it. Despite the decline in reported incidents, too many teachers continue to report being verbally or physically abused by their students. This simply cannot and should not be tolerated.

10 Alternative programs are not just a matter of compliance with the law; they are many children's last chance at success.

The key to the success of alternative education programs appears to be carefully planned structure, a caring staff, and an expectation of success.

The Education Code requires each school district to provide an alternative education program. Alternative education often is viewed as a punishment or as a mechanism for removing disruptive children from the classroom. But alternative education programs are not baby-sitting organizations for bad kids, and placement in alternative education should not be a "badge of honor" for gang members.

Learn what works and try to reproduce it.

Successful alternative programs are intellectually challenging; offer nontraditional educational methods that are self-paced and can be tailored to meet the needs of a wide variety of students; have strict discipline, including a dress code that bans the wearing of gang colors; and offer intense counseling for troubled youth.

TSPR has observed several very successful alternative education programs, including the ones employed by Ysleta ISD in El Paso and San Angelo ISD. The key to the success of these programs appears to be carefully planned structure, a caring staff, and an expectation of success.

What are the alternatives?

Not all alternative programs are intended solely for students with disciplinary problems. Some are geared toward students who are not succeeding in a regular educational environment, have dropped out of school, are parents, or must work to support a family and cannot attend class during regular class times. It is important not to lump all of these students in one group. A student placed in an alternative setting for disciplinary reasons has needs that differ significantly from those of a teenage mother. Therefore, TSPR discourages the commingling of elementary students with secondary students. Students with specific educational needs also should not be commingled with those with disciplinary problems.

Not all school districts provide alternative education programs themselves; some share programs with neighboring districts. TSPR knows of one school district in a county that provides alternative services for disciplinary placements, while another in the same county specializes in serving students that are behind in their grade levels. In Houston ISD, the district has contracted for alternative education services and is pleased with the results.

CONCLUSION

In a time of public and parental concern and frustration over the amount of crime and violence in and around Texas schools, TSPR has found that districts must have a *plan* for keeping their children safe. An effective program of prevention, intervention, and enforcement begins by establishing *clear expectations* with students, parents, faculty, and administration; *addresses warning signs* before they escalate into trouble; and *helps children who have disobeyed the rules* learn how to become accepted and productive members of society.

If you would like more information on any aspect of the Texas School Performance Review, please call 1-800-232-8927 or contact us via email at: <beat-waste@cpa.state.tx.us>.

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